

Walking with men to heal their buried pain

Brice Balmer

A recent Statistics Canada survey (National Population Health Survey 2007) reported that, compared to women, men generally have fewer internal emotional resources to handle pain and suffering. The men surveyed were less able to discuss or acknowledge their feelings, and they were twice as likely as women to suffer a depression after a divorce. Initially they may seem to cope with divorce better than women, because they draw on their intellect and try to think their way through the difficulty. They are less likely to go through mood swings and may regard their daughters, sisters, and wives as exaggerating and carrying on when these women struggle emotionally. While the men may express anger and rage, they may not have practiced or worked with other

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emotions necessary in the grief process, such as sadness, loneliness, hurt, abandonment, and betrayal.

When confronted with grief, divorce, physical illness, or mental health issues, men often put their pain in a sealed box inside themselves. They rarely choose to experience it directly. But ignoring pain and suffering does not make these realities disappear; uncontrollable emotions and pain may well emerge after a few weeks or months. The

suppressed pain may manifest itself physically in illness, extreme tiredness, or depression, even to the point that a man may become immobilized. Though these men have tried hard to avoid any signs of weakness, they may become vulnerable.

Grief delayed, grief avoided

Of course, some men have learned how to cope emotionally with pain and suffering, but pastors must be prepared to work with men

who find vulnerability and emotional work difficult. At one extreme, one may observe an emotionally stifled man, and at the other, a man who cannot stop crying and is on an emotional rollercoaster. Yet both extremes may be manifestations of the same underlying phenomenon: a lack of emotional training and work. The man on an emotional rollercoaster may be grieving many past experiences, not just the presenting loss.

In my work as a pastor in a congregation and as a leader of spiritual and masculinity groups in an alcohol recovery home, I have been amazed to observe many men still in the initial stages of grief several years after a divorce or the death of a spouse. Some have avoided the pain and suffering by becoming absorbed in work; others have drowned their sorrows in alcohol and drugs.

One widower entered the recovery home four years after his beloved wife died. He was still numb and in shock. He had been drinking to avoid the pain. His recovery meant moving through the grief process for his wife and for the alcohol.

A widower in the congregation resisted burying his wife's ashes. His family and his wife's siblings asked him over and over if they could bury her remains so they could move on with their grief. He gave all sorts of reasons for putting off the burial. Six months after her death, we were finally able to bury her ashes.

A son died many years ago; his father still cannot talk about him. He buried his feelings and hoped that he could tough it out.

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He did not want to be emotional. He had to be strong for his family and keep the business and home running. It is difficult to assess whether his developing physical problems are the result of stifling his emotions. Of course, the loss of their son was also his wife's loss. She responded by talking about the loss, praying, asking for support, receiving counseling and pastoral care, remembering her son, sharing stories of their experiences, and crying often. Her loss will always be with her. She can't do her husband's emotional work for this

deep pain in their lives. She wishes he could face his grief and become less rigid and resentful.

Unacknowledged feelings

At the risk of oversimplifying and stereotyping, we can trace some general tendencies. While girls explore emotions by playing with dolls, experiencing the intricacies of friendship, and learning emotional skills from their mothers and other women, boys compete in sports, explore their environment, build things, and mend relationships quickly so games and adventures can continue. Boys don't have time for or interest in exploring all the emotions that arise as friendships break down and conflicts erupt. Boys are supposed to be brave, learn to win, and move ahead with tasks and games. They prefer to solve problems with quick fixes

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rather than by taking time to delve deeply into feelings. Guy friends are good buddies. A boy wants to know how he can keep his buddy; he is not interested in processing emotions and tensions.

If they have had this kind of formation, men who experience suffering and pain as adults will be inclined to tough things out and stick to the game plan. They do not want to be the cog that breaks down and requires others to shoulder more work. Their assets are loyalty, courage, stamina, strength of character and body, and longsuffering. Women may also have these assets but are less likely to stifle their emotions in order to move forward.

With minor problems, this male strategy often works. Unfortunately, a tipping point may come, when men need to work through suffering and painful feelings in order to move on in life. At the Alcohol Recovery Home, we had a chart that displayed forty or so faces expressing a wide variety of human emotions. We used this chart often to help men identify the feelings they were experiencing but had difficulty naming. I have also used the chart with men in the congregation and in counselling.

Several times over the past six years, I worked at both recovery homes, men's and women's. At the women's recovery home, significant emotion and intuition were in evidence. My role was to help the women think through their experiences, to assist them in moving from heart to intellect. At the men's recovery home,

many men automatically focused on their thoughts rather than their feelings. I warned one seminary intern, “I’m not being mean, but I must help the men feel their way through these experiences. They can’t just go into their heads.” The differences in gender were obvious, and the strategies for healing were different.

Pastoral care for men in pain

Adult men will inevitably experience pain and suffering: family and marriage problems, issues in the working environment, death

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of friends and family members, physical illness, disability, or mental health issues. It is vital that pastors and others in the church walk with men during these difficult times.

The first and most important step in walking with them is to recognize that men in our culture generally have an emotional and developmental process quite different from that of many women. Our culture has trained us to be self denying, concerned about others, and attentive to keeping our family and environment stable. As pastors and other caregivers, we need to accept a man who is suffering just as he is and as he has been trained. We may feel some frustration and

anger, but we need to build deep trust and create a safe place where he can be vulnerable without losing his dignity or our love and companionship.

As deep trust develops, pastors and elders need to watch for clues that the man wishes to share his experiences. We need to be ready to listen and invite him to disclose not only his understanding but also his feelings. We will allow him to work at his own pace, though sometimes we may nudge him.

Men benefit from talking with other men who have experienced a similar trauma. The church and elders may decide to create a men’s self-help group with or without a male facilitator. The congregation may wish to form a support group to surround a man as he walks through pain and into healing. He should have significant input into the composition of the group, but he should not invite participants.

I recommend all-male support and self-help groups for several reasons. First, many men look to women to do their emotional work for them. They see women as the emotional experts and in the presence of women may continue to avoid facing the pain directly. Second, men can confront each other, share experiences, and demonstrate male emotions and appropriate processes for dealing with pain and suffering. Third, there is a positive male bond—between buddies—which can allow men to pursue healing. They may find healing through sports activities, meals together, camping, or meeting for coffee. They may not directly discuss their pain and suffering, but the men can feel supported and cared for among friends. Finally, many activities where men gather and support one another have disappeared from North American society. These groups were often patriarchal—old boys clubs of one sort or another. Now men need new male groupings to support, confide in, and care for one another.

Men's suffering and pain may be buried deep inside. Can pastors, elders, and the church walk alongside, so that men not only relieve their emotional anguish but also develop a fuller emotional life? Can these men then help others who experience trauma and need to find new emotional resources in order to heal?

About the author

Brice Balmer is chaplaincy director at House of Friendship, Kitchener, Ontario, where he has led spiritual discovery and masculinity groups with men recovering from addiction. He was copastor of First Mennonite Church, Kitchener, for seventeen years and led some men's groups at the church. In his doctor of ministry studies, he explored masculinity and spirituality for men in the midst of recovery from addiction and abuse.